

Mr Metzler
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Mihrab and frieze. Mosaic tile decoration from the interior of a mosque. Persia, Isfahan, 15th century. 62.23, Gift of Katharine Holden Thayer.

The mihrab is a niche, built into all Muhammadan mosques, to indicate the direction of Mecca, to which all Moslems must face during prayer. It corresponds in this respect to the altar of a Christian church which similarly indicates the direction of prayer. The mihrab, however, has no other ritual function and it has no furnishings, as no cult objects are used in the Moslem service. Generally associated with the mihrab, and standing nearby, is a minbar or pulpit, generally of wood, from which the prayers are lead and the sermons preached on Fridays.

To emphasize its importance the mihrab is always the most elaborately decorated part of the mosque. The frieze undoubtedly ran around the top of the wall of the room just underneath the cupola as a subsidiary decorative element. The mihrab may be of any building material, such as stone and plaster, and in the earliest Muhammadan period these were the materials most commonly used. It was at Samarkand, under Timurlane in the fourteenth century, that ceramic tile was first extensively used. From that time on through the seventeenth century, it is the characteristic material for the mihrab and other interior (as well as exterior) decoration of the architecture of Persia.

The technique of the early tile decoration - as in the case of the Cleveland mihrab and frieze - is known as tile mosaic. The various colors required for the mosaic pattern were fired as large slabs of monochrome glazed tile. These were afterwards skillfully cut up into small pieces shaped as the elements, or parts of the element, of the design and were then pieced together, after the fashion of mosaic work, in a bed of plaster or cement. This was the characteristic method used in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Later to simplify the work and the cost of construction, the designs were painted in colored glazes on square tile units which, after firing, were laid up in rows as is done with modern tile.

It is the complexity of the technique, the elaborate design and the strong and brilliant colors used in the early tile mosaics which place them among the great masterpieces of Muhammadan decorative art.

The actual mosque to which this mosaic tile decoration originally belonged is not known. A large section of the old quarter of Isfahan is currently being razed for the construction of new wide streets and modern buildings and many ancient buildings have been destroyed in the process. It is believed that the Museum's mihrab and frieze may be from one of the small mosques in this area.

The inscription around the face of the mihrab is from the Koran. It is written in Arabic which is the language of the Koran in all Moslem countries regardless of the native language - just as Latin is normally used in the Catholic church. The verses chosen in this case are particularly apt as they

refer to a niche and to the temples which god has allowed to be reared that his name be remembered in them, i.e., a mosque. The text is taken from Sura XXIV, the Sura of Light, verses 35 and 36:

God is the LIGHT of the Heavens and of the Earth. His Light is like a niche in which is a lamp - the lamp encased in glass - the glass, as it were, a glistening star. From a blessed tree is it lighted, the olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would well shine out, even though fire touched it not! It is light upon light. God guideth whom He will to His light, and God setteth forth parables to men, for God knoweth all things.

In the temples which God hath allowed to be reared, that His name may herein be remembered, do men praise him morn and even.

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Forty Near Eastern carpets (all 19th and early 20th century) have come to the Museum as a bequest from Charles Abel. Of these, five (from the regions of Turkey and Caucasia) are now on exhibit in Gallery 35.